

\*I, henceforth known as "the author", must proclaim my stewardship of this web-published product, henceforth known as "BorgSpace". The author of BorgSpace scribes her product following the precept as laid out in the original Star Traks literature, henceforth known as "A. Decker's drivel". A. Decker's drivel is loosely based on the concept as first outlined in the numerous Star Trek series, of which Paramount is the proprietor.

## **A Very Long Distance Call**

Lieutenant Sean Russell of the Federation station Waystation was happily locked in his workroom engaged in one of his favorite activities - tinkering. For the past week, he had fully concentrated on finishing his newest invention; so vital was his need for absolute quiet, he "conveniently" made sure he "disappeared" in the eyes of the computer sensors when he wasn't actively scheduled to be on-duty.

"One more little adjustment...." muttered Sean to himself, tweaking a bit of wire which ran from what appeared to be a metallic hairnet to mid-sized black box with twinkling green lights. "Soon...soon I will have...pizza!"

Sean was not just on the quest for pizza, but perfect pizza. Sure, there were several eateries which had pizza (either Terran fashion or some alien interpretation) on the station, but they never got it quite right. Perfect pizza was at least one-day old, such that crust, fresh the day prior, had just a hint of stale flavor. Perfect pizza was cold from a refrigerator and meant to be eaten for breakfast when one was in such a rush that even cereal took too long to replicate. Perfect pizza consisted of tangy tomato sauce, cheese pooled into consolidated oil puddles, pepperoni curled up at the edges, and mushrooms shrunk to half their pre-oven size. In other words, perfect pizza was not to be found within three hundred light years of the station, except for within Sean's mind.

This presented quite a dilemma.

The solution was on the workbench, nearly complete. The hairnet gizmo, connected to a few pilfered medical instruments from sickbay, would read Sean's mental picture and expectations of perfect pizza when he put it on his head. The medical tools would then relay the information to a small replicator (misplaced from inventory originally meant for a colony ship), which would then attempt to produce the required food. If compounds were missing or needed, the replicator would activate a miniature transporter. The transporter (the parts came from a cargo transporter, which was in fact actually broken and still waiting for a part to be shipped...Sean had just never informed anyone he had the necessary bit to repair it in his workroom) was plugged into station sensors, and through that, could search Waystation and its immediate environs for needed materials. If all was built correctly, and it seemed to be, perfect pizza would be on the bench in the next five minutes.

Sean rubbed his hands in anticipation and uttered a bout of maniacal laughter for effect.

Yeoman Tina Jones was bored, but that was nothing new. Greeting ships as they arrived, making sure papers were in order, pointing the direction to the nearest public restroom...a computer could do the same actions and would be perfectly happy besides. Currently there was a lull where no colony ships, supply ships, military ships, or any other type of ship for that matter, was anticipated for the next two days.

Tina tried to rationalize her thoughts. It wasn't that she didn't have anything to do...it was that it was always the same. Other Starfleet personnel, specifically those zooming about the

galaxy on ships, had exciting things happen to them (Tina was conveniently forgetting the Secondprize, most likely a case of horrible repressed memories). At the very least the scenery changed. To top it off, when there was a break in the routine, it became more than apparent how little responsibility Tina actually had.

Sneaking a peak at a clock on a nearby wall terminal in the corridor she was currently in, Tina sighed. Only seven more hours to try to look busy (or hide) before her shift was done.

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Second methodically plowed through the current status reports of the four thousand drones of Cube #347. In a case of “in one ear and out the other”, Second was paying only superficial attention, occasionally flagging one designation or another as small discrepancies in the reports were mentally scrolled through. The remainder of his focus was within the decision cascade initiated by Captain several days prior in an effort to process a large load of data and emerge with a direction to go in the pursuit of species #8511.

Captain's body was currently in regeneration, although his mental signature could be felt moving along the nets from one working partition to the next, correlating data and sending the giant organic computer which was Cube #347 off on another tangential search. That left Second nominally in charge with a support function, completing his normal duties as well patrolling the tangents to make sure they were staying somewhat on track and not degenerating into, say, an argument as to which species built a better civilization before its assimilation into the Collective, which was, of course, the best of all.

Recently, in the outskirts of a vast nebula, the search of species #8511 appeared to have come to an end when a colony system was found. Unfortunately, some type of physically manifested mental ability which included, among other things, the capacity of throwing one's mind hundreds of light years and the mass transportation of matter. The ability was called “grouf”; and with it, species #8511 had seriously embarrassed Cube #347 in particular, and the Borg in general. Before totally disappearing, information had been downloaded from a cargo transport. It was that mildly unhelpful data which was being shifted through to try to find clues as to where the /real/ home system of species #8511 might lie. Thus far few concrete facts had been gleaned, although small nuggets, such as the information long-distance grouf was technologically enhanced, were very interesting.

One of the status reports momentarily caught Second's main attention. 18 of 79, already on hull maintenance detail, had been replicating a large amount of ultraviolet-reflecting paint. A very large amount. Second flagged the file, then made a mental note to (1) inform Delta, who, as engineering head, would look into the details of the matter, and (2) dump a remotely operated vehicle outside and have it scan the surface of the cube in the appropriate frequencies, for the results were sure to be interesting.

Distraction taken care of, Second continued with his double duty.

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Sean smiled, all was done! He flipped a few switches on the sides of many instruments with blinking lights, then put on the hairnet. Closing his eyes, Sean proceeded to think of perfect pizza.

Tina had found a spot to hide in one of the multitudes of Jefferies tube crawlspaces which snaked throughout Waystation. An intersection of a horizontal and vertical shaft gave just enough room to sit up straight as long as feet were dangled over the edge and one watched where one placed one's head. On her PADD, Tina accessed the game files of the computer, selecting a classic solitaire called Klondike.

"Okay. Red ten on black jack. That means the black six of clubs can go on either of the red sevens. Mmmm...I think the seven of diamonds would be best. Now...if I can get rid of that four there, I can pull out the ace of spades for the foundation pile."

Hearing the echoing sounds of someone climbing up the ladder from below, Tina pushed herself back and popped off a panel, preparing to look like she was busy. The slight tingling sensation in her neck and arms was ignored as being static discharge from the revealed conduit.

Sean opened his eyes and looked at the replicator platform on his bench. No pizza yet. He screwed his eyes closed again and concentrated harder.

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{Partition #10 what do you think you are doing? You are supposed to be looking for clues in the downloaded starcharts as to where species #8511 originated.}

Silence was the answer.

Second sarcastically grumbled, {Are we having fun yet? I can see we are, but speculating as to what the hologram of a kinetic structure might say about the sexual preferences of a species is not what we are supposed to be doing.}

{But...but...} came the protesting voice of 29 of 46, {but it was in the files we were given to work with!}

{One miscellaneous pornographic cultural pict misfiled in tens of gigabytes of stellar charts, and you jokers happen to find it.}

Whined 13 of 46, {But...but...}

{No buts...purge the information now and get back to your assigned work!}

Second followed as the data was faithfully deleted, although he managed to snag a copy of it for himself at the last moment. The picture was moved into the files reserved for the Hierarchy of Eight - Captain, himself, and the six others who were the rotating heads of the cube - to examine the later and make their own conjectures. The tingling of non-prosthetic body parts was not noticed by a mind which had long since been programmed to regard sensations of pain as irrelevant.

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Sean opened his eyes to see...a perfect pizza! Grinning hugely, he ripped the hairnet off his head and set to savoring the already sectioned and exquisitely chilled Italian pie.

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Somewhere in the multiverses, an unimportant being on an unimportant planet of blues and greens with swirls of white daydreamed. "Oops," said the being in an unimportant manner, unknowing why it suddenly had the intense feeling to do so. Oops indeed.

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Second closed his eyes and blackened the input from his ocular implant. Something did not feel right, did not feel correct. The background noise of thousands of on-going conversations was bothering him for some reason. Borg do not feel nausea, Borg do not get sick to their stomach, and Second had long since forgotten those sensations from his pre-assimilation, many decades in the past. Feel...feel...a headache? an unpleasant pressure behind his eyes? a thousand insects crawling over his body?

Then all perception of the body stopped, silence of thought reigned. A deathly silence, the total stillness unbroken except by the turnings of one very small mind.

Second's eyes flew open as a metallic \*shunk\* sound intruded, followed by, "What are you doing here? And why do you have the panel to the waste reclamation conduit open? Are you trying to cause an environmental failure of odorous proportions?" Swiftly turning a head towards the vaguely familiar words, Second saw a smooth face of light brown hovering above gray-clothed shoulders, an arm from which was holding onto brackets out of view in a vertical shaft. The face under a shock of black hair was in a mask of vast confusion. Second could only stare back.

"Tina...are you okay? I didn't mean to startle you. It's just that if there is a problem in the conduits, you really should clear it with engineering before you try to fix things yourself. I was heading up another level, but I've plenty of time if you need a hand." Pause. "I really didn't mean to scare you."

Thoughts twisted in the slow molasses which had become Second's brain. Looking down, a hand held a flat object with a small display. The other hand held nothing. Wait a minute...two hands...no prosthesis...silence in the nets and...and...and....

Second screamed, tried to scramble to her feet, thunked her head against the ceiling of the Jefferies tube, and fell into unconsciousness before the wide-eyed audience of Ensign Jon Whapler.

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Tina closed her eyes...she felt sick. Maybe she should have checked station schematics first before she opened that panel; a good dose of radiation poisoning was not something to look forward to, assuming Dr. Nelson could be persuaded to take time away from her self-studies to mix and administer the hypospray antidote. Her hair was going to fall out, she just knew it. Humans just didn't look good bald unless they were dashing male captains of starships or frontier stations. Feel...feel...a headache? an unpleasant pressure behind her eyes? a thousand insects crawling over her body?

Then all perception of the body stopped, silence of thought reigned. A deathly silence, the total stillness unbroken except by the turnings of one very small mind.

Suddenly the deep quiet was broken by the cacophony of hundreds of separate conversations being held on the universe's largest party hotline. Images, perceptions, sounds, blocks of text flew through awareness, with the incessant voices always present. Concentration could bring individual discussions into crystal clarity, but such mental discipline was difficult to maintain for more than a few dizzying seconds.

A clank like that of footsteps on a metallic walkway far above a very solid surface sounded to the right. "Second, your mind faded from the lattices and now the signature feels...odd. Did you so offend Delta in the recent past that she directed the computer to feed your body the wrong mix of compounds your last regeneration cycle? If your body is giving you trouble, you should go back to your alcove, or see Doctor." Tina opened? too many eyes and stiffly turned towards the unknown voice. Standing in a door-sized opening and looking back was a mottled gray face, a goodly part of which was obscured by a black covering and metal shapes with blinking lights. Tubes sprouted from the back of the head to wind down to a body covered in a black body suit. Although the face registered no known expression, Tina could /feel/ a questioning confusion accompanying the words.

Thoughts chasing each other in a circle, Tina looked down, only to count one...two.....limbs emerging from a torso similarly clothed in a skin tight black suit. And limbs was the only correct term as one of the arms was not...whole. Things were clicking...and not clicking...and clicking....

"Second. Are you alright?"

Tina screamed and attempted to back away in horror, only to bang against a bulkhead. Smacking a head and falling into unconsciousness would have been a blessing, but it did not happen, could not happen, so Tina screamed some more with a voice not his own. Finally a blackness of a sort did descend as he /mentally/ heard a cryptic, {Emergency command code send, path override hierarchy drone maintenance with bridge notification of head, designation 27 of 27; execute action immediate stasis shut-down to target 3 of 8.}

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Second blinked into wakefulness, momentarily confused as to the sight of a white ceiling. Borg spent their entire lives standing; the only time one was on one's back would be during extensive implant surgery or maintenance. Something was not right, that was a certainty, but she could not figure out what had happened. She needed time to think.

A beep sounded.

"Coming...coming! Computer, silence that alarm. 'Bout time you awoke, Tina. Nasty bump. Now, if you can get to your feet, I'll give you another hypospray for what is going to be a major headache, then you can go to your quarters to recover. I'm busy, you know. Can't have patients cluttering up the biobeds." A humanoid face swum into the overhead view, female, peering at some readouts. "Hold still." Second felt a cold sensation at the side of her neck.

"There. All done. Now go away."

"I..." tried Second, "...I...." She stopped and carefully considered her next words, forcing the vocabulary to work. Second knew she should have access to thousands of languages, but right now only one was available. She changed her approach, reverting to a more comfortable plural to combat the singleness which was echoing in her thoughts. "We...we are 3 of 8, sub-designation Second, of Exploratory-class Cube #347."

The person, the doctor?, blinked. "Tina? You hit your head harder than Ensign Whapler said?"

"We are 3 of 8, sub-designation Second, of Exploratory-class Cube #347."

"Hello Tina...don't scare me like this. I really don't have the time to practice medicine on anyone but myself."

"We are 3 of 8, sub-designation Second, of Exploratory-class Cube #347." Second took strength from the litany, using like a ward against the unknown, like a security blanket. "We are 3 of 8, sub-designation Second, of Exploratory-class Cube #347. You will be assimilated."

"Whoa! Hold on now. No, don't try to get up." Second struggled to stand, but the distance between the top of the bed and the floor became an insurmountable obstacle. Finding herself painfully on the deck after an ineffectual flailing of arms, Second tried to get organized enough to make it upright. "Stay there Tina. Where did I put...there's the hypospray. Sedative. Hold still Tina. This won't hurt a bit."

Second had finally struggled to her feet, using the top of the biobed as her main support. The task of walking presented a problem, however, as the different center of gravity threatened to send her floorwards once more. A small jab of coldness suddenly blossomed in her neck again. Turning swiftly, and nearly toppling over, Second caught herself and uttered, "You will be assimilated. We are 3 of 8, sub-designation Second, of Exploratory-class Cube #347. Your biological distinctiveness will be...will be...will be added...." Second blinked in drowsiness, then slumped to the deck of the sickbay.

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Tina awoke. There was no difference between wakefulness and sleep; one moment all had been drifting nothingness, the next he was staring into a dimly lit area. 'Perhaps this is what reincarnation feels like?' thought Tina to himself.

"Reincarnation? I suppose that might be one way of looking at it, albeit more theologically positive than usual. Let us cut to the chase. You are wearing, for lack of a better term, the body of my backup facilitator, 3 of 8. I want to know where his mind has been put."

A nightmare visage came into view, staring intently at Tina. He wanted to turn away, or at least scream, but it was denied.

"The body has been locked. If you promise not to scream, I'll send the code to release the head area. If you do scream, I'll break every personal partition you try to raise and scramble your mental signature to get the information I want. I have taken the added precaution of locking your transceiver out of the general sub-collective, although I can still hear what is going on. If you were of Borg mentality, even one of this cube, you would not be sane much longer.

"Do you promise?"

Tina took a second to realize what the thing was asking, its glare at him was so intense. Promise not to scream? He could do that.

"Good. You can now talk out loud, if you wish."

"Where...."

"You are on Exploratory-class Cube #347 of the Borg Collective. The precise astronomical coordinate is irrelevant. I am 4 of 8, currently subdesignated Captain. Now comes the question, who are you?"

"Could you not..."

"Could I not just ransack your thoughts like I am doing now? Certainly, as that is a Borg body you are in, complete with all the technological hardware, but your mind is not arrayed in the standard Borg fashion. If I broke your mental signature, which I could, I may get all the information I want...but then again, I may just get a scrambled mess. Surface thoughts are easy, but I need the deep ones. So, who are you?"

"I am Yeoman Tina Jones of the Federation station Waystation," Tina replied. He listened to his voice, oddly resonant with definite metallic overtones. Although he could move his head around, he did not want to look downwards and be confronted with the sight of a body not his own. Instead he kept his eyes planted firmly on the one called Captain.

"You greet visiting ships? What a boring and repetitive duty, and trust me, this sub-collective knows all about boredom. But you keep on doing it without question...maybe the Federation is more enlightened than it was thought."

Tina said, "Stop that! Let me at least complete what I was going to say. Finishing my thoughts is too weird."

"And exchanging information solely by vocal manner is inefficient. You do not know what happened." There came an unnaturally long pause which lasted several minutes before Captain continued as if he had not stopped, "We unfortunately suspect we know where Second is." The switch to the plural was extremely unsettling.

Tina felt many questions bubbling inside, but he did not want to voice them. This place was too odd, almost surreal. The reality of the situation, however, was starkly brought into clarity by the still figure in front of him. Captain's eye seemed to be vacant, but on some level, Tina could vaguely feel an active presence, or presences.

Tina just wanted to go home.

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Second just wanted to go home.

She had awoken again to stare uncomfortably at the sight of the ceiling. However, this time she was unable to move anything below her neck. Tilting her head backwards, she could just see a screen of meaningless displays. Somewhere off to the right, out of line of sight, two voices were talking.

"Just tell me what that thing says. Squiggly lines of various colors means nothing to me."

"It is a recording of Tina's normal memory encephalogram." The second voice was that of the doctor.

"Sure, whatever you say, Dr. Nelson."

"Notice. The top set is of Tina during her last mandatory check-up. The second is that of Tina less than an hour ago."

"They don't look the same."

"Exactly."

"Well?" Long pause. "What does it mean?"

"Oh, sorry Commander. It means that it may be a while before I can get back to my studies." Another long pause, then a hasty continuation, "It also means that Tina out there isn't the Tina we know. It may have happened when she bumped her head, but an alternate personality apparently popped out."

"One that thinks she is a Borg."

"Go fig. The only thing I don't understand that even in a total loss of primary personality, there should still be an underlying similarity between the graphs. They all inhabit the same brain, you know. It is almost like this personality has a totally different set of memories than the Tina we know."

"Fine. I want to talk to her now."

"No problem. I've set up a confining force field from the neck down, but she will be able to talk. Good, the monitor says she is awake."

The doctor emerged from around the corner, followed by another female in Federation uniform. The second woman moved with a purpose, like she owned the place. Her voice, when she spoke, confirmed her as the second part of the unseen conversation,

"Tina...do you know who I am?"

"You are Federation. What have you done to me...er...us?"

"I am Lisa Beck, your captain of the Waystation. Do you know who you are?" Lisa was speaking slowly, as if to a small, and slightly dumb, child.

"We are 3 of 8, sub-designation Second, of Exploratory-class Cube #347."

"Okaaaaay...I would like to talk to Yeoman Tina Jones of the Waystation now. Tina, you understand? I want to talk to Tina."

Second was confused. She tried to focus on the face of Commander Beck, but the eyes would not work right, were too organic and limited. "Is your hearing defective? I am...er...we are not Tina. We are Second."

"A-hah! You said I! Borg do not say I!"

"I conjecture I am currently not in my customary body; I am /alone/, by /myself/, and feeling very /small/ right now, so forgive me if I sound a bit neurotic at the moment. But the fact remains my designation is 3 of 8, or Second, and not Yeoman Tina Jones." Second dropped the plural; without the support of the other minds of her sub-collective it was difficult to maintain a speech pattern she normally didn't follow anyway.

"Tina," started Lisa again, but did not continue as she peered at Second's face. "Fine, Second...3 of 8 is too damn long. Second, I want to hear how you got into Tina's body." Lisa sounded like she was humoring an ignoramus who was insisting Terra was flat and could prove it. In the background, Dr. Nelson hovered anxiously as if she wanted to say something, but did not dare to interrupt.

"I don't know. This is an uncomfortable position. I want to stand."

"No tact...obviously not the Tina we know," was said in an undertone. Louder, "If the confining field is dropped, will you promise not to, um, try to assimilate anything."

"The question is moot. Does this look like my normal body?" Sarcasm dripped from Second's voice. "If it was, this conversation would not be happening. This is a wholly organic piece of trash. My thoughts move slowly, I am essentially blind and deaf, and there is absolutely no augmented storage space for information. One hundred thirty-five - what is the right word? years for lack of a better term - years ago I might have thought differently, but at that point I was also a stupid young adult of a colony world. I /like/ being 3 of 8!" Second felt the overwhelming urge to gesture, but could not. She also felt, "And why is there an uncomfortable pressure in my lower body? And why is my middle torso making an odd rumbling sound?"

Lisa quickly backed up. "Doctor, I leave it in your capable hands. You figure out what is happening, then tell me. It doesn't seem to be threatening the station, sooo...you deal with it." The captain turned and swiftly disappeared from view. In the close distance, the sound of sliding doors was heard to open and close.

Dr. Nelson filled Second's field of view. Distractedly she said, "Dandy fun. Where does Lisa get the idea I actually have the time to spare from you, Midon?" Second felt an odd sensation of chills going down her spine; she might be out of her body, but the doctor did not seem to be in her right mind.



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"But I don't want a Borg designation!" protested Tina. He still could not move anything below his neck, but he put his jaw to good use, jutting it out stubbornly.

"You cannot be called Tina."

"Why not? You don't have an awkward numerical name!"

Captain sighed, both in Tina's mind and visibly, "Designations are precise, especially when coupled with a mental signature. Names are imprecise...there are trillions of Borg in the Collective, think of the chaos if a few million of them were known only as Smith. And my 'name' is temporary, only lasting as long as the current assignment of this sub-collective, after which I will be known as 4 of 8 of Exploratory-class Cube #347 once more. That future date will be a relief."

"I still don't want a Borg number!"

"We suspect we know what is going on, and unless the Federation tens of thousands of light years distant in the Alpha quadrant manages to figure it out as well, AND if they deign to return Second, a designation is useless, I agree. However, the odds are calculated to be heavily against the possibility. In that case, this cube has lost a member of the Hierarchy of Eight, although we can replace 3 of 8.

"There could be worse places to be than Cube #347. If this had happened with any other sub-collective within the Greater Consciousness, you would have been terminated within five minutes to limit corruption. As it is, you'll fit right in with us. In time your mind will adapt to the pathways constructed in Second's original assimilation, or so Assimilation thinks."

"I still don't want a Borg number!"

"Too bad. Drone maintenance hierarchy needs a member, and you'll slot there as well as anywhere. Your new designation is 26 of 152. As I have other concerns, most notably leading the consensus to see if there is a way to get Second back, Assimilation will take care of you."

Before Tina could say anything, Captain disappeared in a green flash of a transporter beam. Almost immediately another Borg reappeared in the same spot. Tina suddenly felt incredibly depressed, as if the weight of the universe had landed on his shoulders.

"26 of 152, let us start from the beginning. As your mind is adjusted to the pathways in Second's brain, I will slowly lead you out into the nets." A pause that stretched into minutes. "Well, this might keep me occupied for a couple of regeneration cycles."

The depression moved even deeper into Tina's mind.

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The bare room was painted that disgusting green found in hospitals across the cosmos. The Borg no longer used that particular tone of paint in maintenance bays, but it had taken thousands of years to eradicate the compulsion from the Greater Consciousness. A bed jutted from one wall, opposite of a table and chair. An alcove, the replicator unit, was positioned waist-high near the table. Two doors led out of the room - one to the bathroom facilities, and the other to the main infirmary area. Second stood in the middle of the room, eyes closed.

So long had it been since her assimilation, she had long since forgotten the sensations involved with organic living. Which had been for the better. The bathroom had been a horrible experience, a torture chamber; and eating, while it had ended the rumbling feelings in her midsection, was a messy activity. Regeneration was so much more efficient.

Second vaguely wondered if the Federation had a secret military outpost somewhere where they studied nanites stolen from the Borg, and if it would be possible to smuggle this body there. Of course, she would have to get out the door to the infirmary, but that was locked. It might be possible to jimmy the thing open, if she could pry open an access panel, AND if the sensors watching her could be disabled.

She might as well have been floating helpless in space.

The door whooshed open. Second opened her eyes to see Dr. Nelson enter. A ubiquitous tricorder was being waved about.

"How you can sleep like that, I don't know. You should just fall over."

Second ignored the comment. "I wish to leave this place now."

"Well, you can't, Tina. I mean Second or whatever you've decided to call yourself. Lisa won't let me let you go until it is figured out what happened. Since injuries to the head which result in traumatic psychosis aren't my specialty, I'll probably ship you off elsewhere. At the very least that will get you out of my hair." The last comment was said under Dr. Nelson's breath. She reached into the lab coat she was wearing and fished out an electronic tablet. "Here. Standing, or whatever, in this room must be boring. This is Tina's personal PADD. Maybe something will jog the correct memory."

Second eagerly reached out for the flat object.

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Tina whimpered. He had theoretically had his body released to move around, but in the strange situation, he had yet to try motivation. Assimilation had broken down the firewalls to expose Tina to the approximate four hundred minds which was his own hierarchy. The results were not good.

Curious questions and information requests could be felt, along with a virtual bombing of data packets and pictures. The sensory input Tina experienced was a dazzle of Technicolor splashes, all muddled together into a murky brown puddle. If he could have, if he had not been held upright in the alcove, Tina would have collapsed into fetal position. The code walls were raised again, leaving him nearly alone in darkness.

{Very good 26 of 152. Less of a reaction this time. You seem to be settling into the mental pathways. Let us try again.}

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This Tina-person must not have lived a very active social life. Second had found the personal logs, but they mainly consisted of descriptions of the day's activities, gripes about her boring job, and wistful wanderings of a vague ambition to "Boldly Go Where No One Has Gone Before".

The PADD beeped as it completed a database search, one of many Second had painfully initiated. It was so much easier to go digging directly through data (or spinning off part of self and delegating a few drones lower in the hierarchy to assist), than to rely on a machine to relay information second-hand. Unfortunately, the requests Second had sent had mainly spat back file numbers designated as "Classified".

Second frowned as she half-closed her eyes, painfully dredging through her mind, looking for the appropriate memories. Finding them, she began to tap a series of code commands on the PADD, building a simple Borg decryption program to break the file locks.

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Sean was munching on the last piece of his pizza, sitting in his chair and going over the latest security reports. The normal collection of brawls, complaints, escaped alien pets (and livestock in one case) from colonists, and shoplifting made for absolutely fascinating reading. Yah, right. Sean yawned as he skimmed over the incident of the party of Klingons mistaking a wandering Ghingus vole as a meal, much to the extreme disapproval of several beings from some religious sect known as Bolshics, who happened to regard the vole as a representative of their supreme deity. The final result when all had been sorted out had been messy. Who knew that the Ghingus vole was a distant relative of the tribble, but with an extremely nasty attitude? The Klingons would be healing for weeks.

The door chime to the office rang. "Enter!" shouted Sean. Lieutenant Craig Porter entered.

"What have you been doing in here?"

"Wha?" asked Sean as he looked up from his screen. He swallowed the last bit of pizza.

"There was a system drain on the power grid, as well as the replicator and communication systems, last shift. Unauthorized transporter activity was also logged. It took a little bit of tracing, but it all came from this office...more exacting, that workspace you keep back there." Craig pointed. He tapped a foot as he waited for an answer.

"Calm down! I learned my lesson last time with that Robo episode. Do you remember back in your Academy days, morning pizza breakfasts?"

Craig blinked at the sudden change in topic. "Yah, who doesn't? But what does that have to do with my station engineering activity logs?"

Sean got up and stretched, "Here, I'll show you. And if this isn't the best pizza you've ever tasted, I'll throw my invention out the airlock. Trust me, the power drain on the grid is worth it."

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Second grinned as she sent the decryption program loose. The hungry feeling was coming back, as well as a fatigue which made her want to just close her eyes, but both could be resisted for now. The Federation obviously did not believe the truth that Second had been (was!) Borg, despite the current body she wore. Her plan to make them believe would be set in motion, as soon as the first files were broken and their precious information spilled.

The feeling of tiredness became heavier, accompanied by a faint prickling about the neck and shoulders. These body sensations were a pain. Did she feel...feel...a headache? an unpleasant pressure behind her eyes? a thousand insects crawling over her body?

Then all perception of the body stopped, silence of thought reigned. A deathly silence, the total stillness unbroken except by the turnings of one very small mind.

Second blinked back into awareness and found himself in an alcove which was not his own; he wasn't even in the part of the cube he regarded as home. A paper-thin firewall had been erected between himself and the rest of the sub-collective, but it was swiftly removed in the quest to pull up a general ship diagram. Ah, there he was, near the "You Are Here" arrow two

levels below the hull of face #3 in subsection 13, submatrix 8. Second focused his optics, distractedly upping the light gathering function, only to find Assimilation standing in front of him.

"Second, is that truly you? Yes it is. Oh well, I guess it is back to my normal routine of nothing." Assimilation promptly transported elsewhere in the cube.

Second dipped avidly back into the nets, searching for Captain, reveling in the feeling of many voices. Just as a board displaying odds for Second's return caught his attention, Captain broke in,

{Second! Did the Federation send you back?}

{No.} Second opened himself to the conjectures into what appeared to have been a switching of minds between himself and the Tina person. {No, I was in a body at a place called Waystation, then I was back here. Perhaps it was a freak occurrence?}

{Perhaps, but I do welcome you back. You have no idea how disquieting it was to suddenly have you screaming at me.}

{Screaming?} Second felt Captain send a memory, and then winced. {I can see exactly how you felt. I am transporting back to my alcove. After regeneration I will be better prepared mentally to return to the original task at hand.}

{Understood.}

Second activated a transporter beam and sent himself back to his normal alcove.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tina felt oddly fatigued, despite the fact he had not been physically active. Assimilation had exposed him five increasingly longer times to the assimilation hierarchy, and each time Tina found himself better able to withstand, and even understand, the controlled chaos in which the cube seemed to operate. Tina found himself adapting, and was horrified at the prospect.

{Prepare yourself, 26 of 152,} said Assimilation.

Tina closed her sight off (it was disconcerting to be dumped into the intranets to experience things there, yet still be seeing the normal world), and steeled himself for the action he knew protesting would not stop. An odd sensation of prickles needled at his brow. That had not happened before. Did he feel...feel...a headache? an unpleasant pressure behind his eyes? a thousand insects crawling over his body?

Then all perception of the body stopped, silence of thought reigned. A deathly silence, the total stillness unbroken except by the turnings of one very small mind.

Tina dropped a PADD from her numb fingers, falling against a bed as her balance was lost. The place was unfamiliar, but it looked like one of the small recovery rooms off of the infirmary. Tina pushed herself upright, then tentatively called out, thrilled her voice sounded, well, normal.

"Hello? Dr. Nelson? Anyone?" She looked about the walls, certain buried sensors would relay her cry. There was no immediate answer, so Tina reached down to grab the PADD, realizing it was her own. An odd display of unrecognizable symbols marched up the screen. Disregarding the PADD, Tina looked towards the door as it opened.

"Dr. Nelson! It /is/ you!"

"Tina? You are not Second now?"

"Second? Of course not! And I'm not 26 of 152 either," said Tina quickly, convincing herself of the reality by stating it aloud. "I am normal Tina Jones, liaison officer of the Federation station Waystation." Tina peered at Dr. Nelson's face, seeking confirmation.

"Yes, you are. Say, if I can run a few tests on you and you turn out okay, how about if you recuperate in your quarters. We can figure out this mess later, as I've gotten quite behind on other, more personal, matters."

"Sure. And I'm very hungry. You won't believe what I have to tell you."

Tina followed Dr. Nelson out of the spare room, absently tucking PADD into a pocket.

\* \* \* \* \*

Craig appreciatively ate another piece of pizza. "You are right Sean, this is the best pizza I've had since my cadet days."

"Told you. Think the station will miss a little power now and then when I get a craving for perfect pizza?" asked Sean.

Craig pondered, although not too long. "No, I don't think so, especially not if you conjure up one for me as well." Craig paused, cold cheese string demanding his full attention. Cheese conquered, Craig continued, "Although, if you don't mind, I'd like to take a few pieces to some others. Perhaps if there is enough demand, maybe we can make a little on the side selling slices to people on ships who long for the 'good old days' of cadethood. Sure that machine can't whip up other foods?"

"Nope," answered Sean to the last question first, "only pizza, for now. As to letting others in on the perfect pizza, go ahead! Pizza is meant to be shared, after all."

Craig grinned, then grabbed the remaining half pie. "I'll probably be back in a couple of hours."

\* \* \* \* \*

Letting his awareness of self float aimlessly about the dataspace, Second was occupied in the Borg equivalent (at least on Cube #347) of letting his mind blank. He did not wish to think about anything, just drift, allowing his mental computing resources be used by one working group or another. A vaguely familiar sensation, one which he realized now was not associated with the body, tugged on him.

{No...not again!}

All perception of the body stopped, silence of thought reigned. A deathly silence, the total stillness unbroken except by the turnings of one very small mind.

Oneness persisted, and Second found herself rolling off of a bed platform and landing painfully on the ground. Unfortunately familiar territory. Boosting herself to her feet, Second looked about, realizing she was not in the infirmary. The room was still quite sparse, but it had a much more tasteful color scheme than any medical ward. Second decided she was in the body of the Tina person again, this time coming to awareness in her personal space. The body was dressed in red and white pajamas instead of a uniform, but that was inconsequential.

The Federation obviously had no idea what was going on, if it was the organization or entity responsible in the first place. Consensus on the cube had drawn the most reasonable conclusion that whatever mind transference was happening, it was powered from a nearby area

from the Waystation end; but then again, other possibilities existed. Second was placing her bets on a clueless Federation.

Balance was easier to accomplish this time, and there were no unpleasant body needs to attend. Adaptation to the lonesomeness was more swift, although several times Second had to steel herself from trembling. She did not want to face that crazy Dr. Nelson again; and who knew what medical sensors might be trained on the Tina body at the moment.

The handheld computer display...PADD...where did the Tina put it? Second stood in the middle of the room, slowly turning in a circle. A Federation uniform, carelessly tossed over the back of a chair, caught her attention. Riffing through the pockets, Second drew out the flat object. The screen was darkened, but jiggling the PADD deactivated the black-out function. Borg alphanumeric slid up the display at a high rate, but a line at the bottom remained stationary. Second read that line, and nodded.

"Good. Decryption of first batch of files 86% completed."

Perhaps something good would come of this odd fiasco after all. Maybe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Very tired after her experiences and the debriefing by an obviously disbelieving Dr. Nelson, Tina had returned to her quarters. After a quick replicator meal during which she made a personal log of the ordeal, Tina put on her sleeping clothes before going to bed. She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the extra-fluffy pillow (not Starfleet issue!).

The dreams Tina had were disturbing, to say the least. For the most part they were dark with voices whispering comments just beyond her range of understanding. At one point, all perception of her dream self stopped, silence of thought reigned. A deathly silence, the total stillness unbroken except by the turnings of one very small mind. Then the murmurs began again:

{Where did Second go? I felt him disappear.}

{On the lattices, that mind is back.}

{26 of 152, wake up.}

Many voices together: {Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.}

Tina swam up out of the waters of sleep, struggling for breath. As he broke surface, he opened his eyes to a gray world not much different than the nightmare he had been experiencing. Before he could do anything else, a bright sparkle of green appeared to the front of him.

"Shall we start again, 26 of 152?" tiredly dragged a too familiar voice. The nightmare was not over.

\* \* \* \* \*

Second read through the first of the decrypted files. Additional searches had drawn data into storage, but the slow unraveling of security protocols kept them in the background. Most of the text was reports and debriefings, but the occasional nugget shined brilliantly. The brightest of the treasures detailed the coordinates of a research asteroid, along with a brief synopsis of security procedures.

A plan began to form in Second's mind. Feeling like she was not taking something into account, she wished she had the members of the sub-collective to pick apart the scheme, to form

consensus. How did humans, or any other species for that matter, stand singleness? There were so many uncertainties!

Second moved down the hallway, ignoring the occasional person who dodged out of her way. She had eyes only for the PADD, continually consulting it for the most direct route to the nearest shuttle with warp capabilities. The fact that Second was still dressed in Tina's pajamas did not register, for Borg had no need for clothes, thus the incredulous looks crew and tourists alike gave were not noticed.

Cube #347 provided instant access for everyone to the transporters, the main reason being it would take most of a day to navigate the maze between subsections, not to mention attempting to travel twist opposite faces. The Federation, however, seemed to be a big believer in walking. Granted, the Waystation could never equal the size of even the smallest cube class, but it none-the-less was an inconveniently large place.

The PADD beeped, then flashed a time (6:30) over the station schematic. Second pushed a series of buttons to dismiss the numbers, only to have a schedule for a daily routine begin to slowly scroll over the display. Frowning, Second read as far as "7:00 - Begin duty shift" before whacking the small computer against a bulkhead in frustration. The screen once more showed the local hallways with a red line tracing her path.

An increasing number of people began to fill the hallways, most looking half-asleep, still tugging shirts straight or drinking steaming liquids from ceramic mugs. One of the few bright-eyed persons became a looming roadblock.

"Tina!" said one Ensign Whapler. "Are you feeling better? And why are you out of uniform so close to the morning shift change?"

Second glanced up from her map to register the owner of the voice. "Out of my way, human. I've a mission to accomplish."

"Dr. Nelson must have given you some odd drug. I got one last time I was in sickbay...everyone looked like dough shapes for hours. Here, I'll help you back to your quarters to wait until it wears off."

"You are blocking my path. Out of my way."

The stream of personnel had turned into a torrent, which collectively swirled around the small obstacle. In one direction went people in clean, freshly pressed uniforms, and in the other direction, those that had been on shift all subjective night and were ready for a little rest and relaxation.

"Come on Tina! I promise to help you out the next time one of those big colonist ships come in, if you will only come with me. People are starting to stare." In fact, everyone was totally ignoring the pair, engrossed in getting to their work areas or quarters.

"I repeat, get out of my way, human." Second extended her unoccupied arm forward and slammed the poor ensign into the wall, knocking his head back such that he slumped to the ground unconscious. She was starting to get the hang on this body, although it did help that Whapler was the equivalent of a 98-pound weakling. Murmurs on the order of "Wonder what the guy did to piss her off so bad?" floated in the air, but in general, the reaction was little. Second returned to the PADD's pictures.

The door to the shuttle bay was locked. Second pulled a panel off the bulkhead and proceeded to try to rewire the mechanisms inside. After a few mild shocks, Second came to the conclusion pain was not a good sensation, but had managed to successfully short-circuit the door to open slightly. Forcing the opening wider, Second squeezed into the bay.

A shuttle sat on its pad, cargo doors open and rear quarter filled with large boxes. The ship had been in the process of unloading, but with the shift change, the night crew had obviously rushed to their quarters and the day shift had yet to arrive from lingering over morning doughnuts. Second sauntered easily up the ramp, maneuvering around the cargo, and into the cockpit. Dilemma.

Second had no clue as to how to pilot the shuttle. With her normal body it would be as easy as assimilating the ship's systems and controlling it directly as if it were simply a new appendage. That was obviously out of the question. The sounds of the shift crew coming into the bay, talking about the damage done in the hallway, spurred Second to action.

"Shuttle doors...shuttle doors....shuttle doors," muttered Second under her breath as she scanned the confusing console. Mind racing in circles like a hamster on a wheel, she called louder, "Computer?"

"Computer on-line," returned the female tones of a Federation computer.

Second nodded. "Okay, computer, um, close cargo doors and prepare for launch." The cries of dismay and "Someone's boosting the shuttle!" was cut off as the superstructure began to tremble with the powering up of the engine. "Launch."

Grinning as the shuttle nosed forwards and through the bay force field, Second felt elated. Federation idiot-proofing had come in use. Now she had only to give the appropriate coordinates for the asteroid base; the time in transit would give time to further the plan and learn to drive the shuttle without use of voice commands. Second lifted the PADD to consult the correct file.

"Shuttle, you will come to a stop. You are messing up the traffic patterns, such as they are this morning, and making me deal with a problem when it is way too early. Stealing a Federation shuttle is a criminal offense, you know," came a hail. The voice was that of Commander Beck. Second ignored the orders.

"It is your funeral, then." The shuttle abruptly came to a halt as a tractor beam from the station was applied.

Second once again found herself in the infirmary, this time standing next to a chair in the main medical area near a back office. Her actions had been carefully questioned by a disbelieving Commander Beck, who had left to think about what to do. Second was now in the hands of Dr. Nelson once more. Not seeing much chance to escape at the moment, Second was content to continue reading Tina's PADD, which she had managed to keep through her capture and interrogation.

It was there, in the medical bay, Second felt the too familiar feeling of falling into nothingness.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sean, I need another pizza."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tina had finally been allowed to be alone, in a relative sense of the word. Content Tina's mind would eventually be forced in the mental pathways and thinking of a Borg, Assimilation had left for another part of the cube. In return, Tina had been transported to another area of the ship, forcefully plugged into an alcove, and given unimportant files to consume.



The cube was an uncommonly quiet place when compared to a Federation starship or station. Ambient sounds included the creak of the superstructure, subaudible rumble of engines, and clank of moving drones or dropped tools. Missing was the organic voices and movement of people which made a ship seem /alive/. On an alternate plane, however, it was completely different.

Although she was not allowed unescorted into the nets, and Tina did not want to be allowed, he could still faintly sense a close and unseen community; and this was not even the full Collective. Tina had the feeling the Greater Consciousness, as the Collective was referred to on Cube #347, was a fairly sterile environment, with the current ship as the equivalent of a party dorm. Still, through carefully concentration, Tina had managed to glean an idea of what was going on, even if he did not understand all the technical terms.

The information was useless, unfortunately, unless his mind was transferred back to his original body. Therefore he was now reading the definitive and unabridged history of the Borg. It was long, boring, and took up more space than he cared to think about. One section, at the very beginning with notations of its probable inaccuracy, was curiously interesting, but he could not quite put his finger on the reason why he should feel the historical figures were familiar.

Tina suddenly felt the sensations which heralded the exchange of minds, this time back to her own body.

Tina found herself standing in the sickbay, dressed in her pajamas and holding a PADD. She absently put the small computer on the chair she saw behind her, the yelled out, "Dr. Nelson? Hello, anybody?"

Nelson came from her office, holding a hypospray. "Tina, is that you?"

Grinning, Tina nodded. "It is me...it is /me/ in my /own/ body. You got to listen, and listen quickly, 'cause I don't know how long I'm going to be here before I get tossed back to that scary cube."

"Really?"

"You gotta believe me! I don't fully understand it all, but I've managed to get some information." Tina was speaking rapidly, nearly babbling, "Some power source over here has formed a supraspatial transient wormhole connection between me and this Borg known as Second. It, like, is capable of transferring mentalities, instead of physical objects like a normal wormhole." Tina was practically in tears now, "I've never heard of supraspatial anything, and I don't want to know about it, but when I was there, and I simply said the words to myself, I couldn't help but get all these technical manuals dumped on me. Most of the words I can't even pronounce, let alone translate, and it is all slipping away like so much water. Data retention has something to do with brain configurations and nanites and assimilation and...and...and...."

Dr. Nelson was just staring at Tina. Tina's eyes widened, "Oh no...it is going to happen again! I can feel it!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The rumor of perfect pizza traveled about Waystation. Faster than anything yet discovered, if the power of rumormongering could be harnessed, the Federation would be able to last a million years and spread throughout hundreds of galaxies. "Try this!" whispered 'Everyman' as he passed out free tastes of the treat, followed by "Russell is the one that can produce it, for a small fee."

With each visualization, Sean became more proficient in producing his version of perfect pizza. There was no cost to him, personally, and the station could withstand the momentary power drains. One deliciously cold pizza after another came from the workroom. It was only when Sean's duty shift began that he halted for a time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Somewhere distant on that unimportant planet, the unimportant being happily repeated to itself, "Oops! Oops! Oops! Oops!" It was a fun and unimportant word, and the being had no idea why it felt it had to say it; it was just the right thing to do. "Oops! Oops!"

\* \* \* \* \*

When the mental yo-yoing finally stopped, Second was back in the Tina body, sitting in a chair in the infirmary. A muffled beep sounded from the PADD, which was digging into the rump region. She kept her eyes closed, fully expecting to go flying back across the galaxy, but nothing continued to happen. Finally she opened her eyes.

"Tina, is that you?" asked an almost concerned Dr. Nelson.

Second stood from the uncomfortable chair. "I am not Tina."

The doors to the infirmary opened with a whoosh, allowing Commander Beck to enter. Dr. Nelson greeted her.

"What is the prognosis?" said Lisa, coming directly to the point.

"Well, sensors I've got calibrated show definite changes in the memory encephalographs, to the tune of five distinct changes in the last five minutes, and more prior to that. A little earlier, Tina was attempting to explain what was going on, but she kept on getting, well, interrupted; then the rate picked up. Now, we seem to have that Borg mind, and Tina is elsewhere, on some cube, I think."

"Can we do anything to stop it?"

"I don't even know why it is happening. All I know is that it is taking vital time from my studies." Lisa's face darkened. Nelson hurriedly continued, "But that is okay. Now, if I was an engineer, I suppose I could do something fancy with dilithium field harmonic convergences or some other technical thingy."

Throughout the conversation, Second was ignored. She did not like being ignored, so she loudly interrupted.

"In the sub-collective, we would simply access those files stored in the engineering hierarchy. You are inefficient."

Beck looked at Second, frowning. Slowly her scowl turned into a grin, then she went back to ignoring Second.

"Nelson, why don't you have a little talk with Porter. He's bound to have some say on the matter."

A short time after Lisa had left, a new Federation officer entered the infirmary. Second was rapidly reading Tina's PADD, scanning through previously encrypted files. She did not know how long she would have this opportunity. If the stability lasted and she was stuck in the Tina body, she needed options; the first attempt at escape had not been planned in full. And if the inefficient Federation managed to send her mind back to regain their precious Tina mentality,

then there would be information for the Greater Consciousness. Second looked up at the new person as he flashed her an odd look.

"Tina? What are you doing here?"

Second opened her mouth to reply when Dr. Nelson hurried out from an inner part of the infirmary, "Craig, back here."

Craig apologetically shrugged at Second, then followed Dr. Nelson to the rear of the infirmary. Second went back to her reading.

"What?" came a loud utterance from the back, "What do you mean?"

"Not so loud," replied the Nelson voice. Second strained the limited hearing in the body to listen without getting caught. A period of indecipherable murmuring followed before the next intelligible words.

Craig: "Oops."

Nelson: "What do you mean 'oops'?"

"When did you say the transferences had been happening?" A series of times was the reply. "Definite oops."

"Please define 'oops'. Are you saying 'oops, I dropped my pencil' or 'oops, the Flarn are about to attack and I forgot to flip the breakers in the shield fusebox'?"

"Maybe not quite as extreme as the latter."

"Explain."

"Well you see, Sean came up with this way to replicate perfect pizza...." The explanation trailed off into inaudibility.

Sean looked up from his desk in his office as Lisa, Dr. Nelson, Craig, and Tina came into his office. He put down his report to regard the group: Tina appeared to be in her pajamas and clutching a PADD?

"What's going on?"

"Where is it Sean?" asked Lisa

"Where is what?"

"That pizza machine."

"Oh, that. Look, it isn't going to get out of hand, not like the Robo thing. It can't even move, and it definitely can't think for itself. What is the harm of a little pizza?" Sean was quite defensive, but took the occasional glance at Tina, who was engrossed in reading something on the PADD.

"Is making pizza the only action it takes?"

"Of course!"

Craig cleared his throat, "Sean, it doesn't quite work like that, or at least pizza creation isn't the only function. Seems I've found the reason for the unusually large power drain your machine demands. Maybe if you will demonstrate how it works?"

Sean blinked, then led the way into his small workroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tina came out of the convoluted darkness to find herself surrounded by people she knew, not gray catwalks nor the voices which had been traipsing through her mind. She sobbed, "No! Please don't force me to be a Borg! I don't wanna be 26 of 152 forever! I can feel you tearing up my mind!"

"Tina!" shouted Lisa, "Tina! You are safe!"

Tina stopped her heaving, then took a longer look around, "I...I'm safe? I'm not going to be sent back?"

"No. You are safe."

Sean looked depressed...no more perfect pizza.

\* \* \* \* \*

Second was having a quiet conversation with Captain. He had uploaded the information he had managed to gain, which had subsequently been relayed to the Greater Consciousness. Most of the data had been trivial, but some of the unexpected windfall would allow the Collective to create more accurate projections of future Federation resistance.

"So," said Captain, "what is your general overall impression of your experience?"

Second yucked, "You know very well what my thoughts on the matter are, but I think I will reiterate one thing. That Tina's job rivals that of anything the Collective could come up with. I am happy I'm not forced to live out my usefulness in her shoes."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tina, now dressed in her Federation uniform, cycled the airlock full of broken parts of the pizza maker. She had insisted to be the one to smash the machine then eject it to the void of the space lanes. Watching it float off serenely, then get smashed on the front windows of a speeding shuttle like a bug smeared on the windshield of a car, was very satisfying.

Lisa stood nearby, watching. Craig had other tasks to attend, Dr. Nelson was busy catching up on her internal scans of herself, and Sean was quietly mourning the loss of his invention. The captain somehow felt it was her duty to be there.

"Come on Tina, your shift will be starting soon, and there is a patrol ship due in for recreation leave." Pause. "What was it like on that cube? I've always wondered what drove the Borg, but I've never wondered too closely."

Tina's vindictive look drained away to one of hollow paleness. "Think of an incredibly tempting opportunity that you dare not take because once the devil enacts payment for your soul, you will never be able to get free. On the whole, it may have been a better deal than the one I've got now as an organic automaton for the Federation." Turning, Tina wandered off down the hallway towards the docking areas, leaving Lisa behind to ponder.